

The Mellow Side of Bill Bartholomew: An artist coming back home to himself

In early November, Rhode Islander Bill Bartholomew returned to Brooklyn, a place he called home for 10 years, to debut his solo record, "Beij," and I was lucky enough to be there. It's a special kind of thrill to see local musicians in other spaces, and self-identified artist of many trades, Bill (who told the crowd it was "terrifying" to re-enter New York as a musician) did not disappoint. Sitting at a tiny table at the back of "Pete's Candy Store" - across from the heart-shaped sign reminding patrons that the donation of \$5 was very much appreciated by the band, I witnessed Bill's raw vulnerability and the support of old friends (many fellow musicians) come together in an intimate show.

If you've seen him play you know he likes to experiment with unexpected sounds; he sprinkles falsettos, guitar riffs, and musical dynamics into a set that could be rock, folk, metal, or a storytelling session. He did it all that night and instead of guitar-smashing-daredevil dance moves, Bill executed badass kicks, contorted over his acoustic guitar, and let the music go where it needed to - all while sitting in a chair (he shared that he had battled long COVID). By the end of his release show, I felt his joy and gratitude for being able to make and share music. I interviewed Bill Bartholomew right before this show and he explained how his two worlds (journalism and music) live side by side, and how creating on his own allowed him to "come back home" to himself.

Mayté (Motif): I'd like you to start by telling me all the things that you do so I don't miss anything.

Bill Bartholomew: Oh wow... well, the way I've been describing myself now is singer, songwriter, media personality. Primarily, I'm a singer-songwriter for my project. I play drums in a number of bands in Rhode Island, and I was/am half of the band Silverteeth, but we're on hiatus. And I am the host of the Bartholomew Town Podcast, producer and host at WPRO, and a contributor at Rhode Island PBS. That's good enough.

M: How would you say journalism bleeds into your music or music into your journalism?

BB: For as long as I can remember I've always had two major interests in my life: music and current affairs/politics/news media, especially local media. I see them all under the umbrella of artist, especially in my specific role in media where I do reporting and straight-type journalism, but I'm more of a performer. When I do podcasting or radio, it's all entertainment and [the] creation of content. It all bleeds seamlessly like that. Then there's the more major side of it, which is **the role of the artist serving as a mirror**. Whether that's through my music or podcasting, it's all me experiencing the world, and then sharing my take on it. I feel like [music and journalism] are always going to be woven together for me. When I perform, now more than ever, there's more storytelling during my sets. And when I create media content there's a musicality to it; I use my hands a lot, even when I'm not on camera. I don't see one as, "Oh, that's my job, and this is my passion." They both are things that I do. They all combine into how I would define my art.

M: I love what you said about interpreting what's happening in the world - in both music and media.

BB: I think that's the ultimate job. There are definitely people who have a more technical approach to music or media, and while I embrace as much technicality as I can, really, all that comes from is my own

emotion or feelings on things. I'm always working on balancing **what should be refined. And what's better than being as raw as possible?**

M: The name of your new album is "Beij" ("kiss" in Portuguese), right?

BB: Yeah, well pronounced.

M: Thank you! What was the vision for "Beij"?

BB: After spending 10 years focusing on music, I was looking for something to add to my portfolio and I naturally fell into podcasting, then talk radio, and then the journalism world surrounding COVID. I'm very thankful for that. I was still doing shows at my loft, playing out, drumming in bands, and recording demos, but my identity had really gone into the media side of things. Late last year I started to feel like I wanted to rebalance that. Having been in bands for a really long time, and also performing as a solo artist, **I really wanted to follow my instinct to be by myself when I made music now...** Through podcasting, I learned that I'm probably my happiest and more fluid- when I'm by myself. I have a team that I work with in radio, and there are major figures in my life- that I bounce ideas off of when I do podcasting, **but I wanted to make a record and reestablish my musical identity by myself... where I was completely able to control my own destiny- anything I was able to accomplish or not accomplish, I could look back and say, hey, that was on me.**

That meant recording, producing, playing all the instruments, and just being alone in my room with the door closed for several months. And then on the other side thinking: how do I want to perform this live? **I decided it was going to be this indie, experimental, folk thing, with a little bit of northern country to it, all the music that I've always wanted to make.** And it was difficult because you get into those moments where you don't know: Is this the right tempo? Is that the vocal take? So, I started to ask people that were close to me what they thought. It really came down to, for the first time really, me saying, "Let me see what happens when I work by myself." That was really the impetus for this entire launch - no one is going to interfere with my vision. That may be the egomaniac talking, but I also think it's the artistic process: the painter, the podcaster, the writer. That's where I wanted to land more so than the camaraderie and the hangout that comes with being in a band; I prioritized the former over the latter in this case.

M: You created the landscape you needed to tell your truth with absolute freedom.

BB: I've been in established bands where there's always been two songwriters, or in some cases, two front people. That's a lot of time to spend splitting songwriting duties... and creating a vision that is emblematic of what you want to do is hard and beautiful when it works. **But, I needed to go back home to myself, just writing songs and putting them out into the world.**

M: You just said that and I got chills for you. That happens when I'm in conversation with people and they say amazing things.

BB: Oh wow, thank you.

M: You're welcome! Many of the songs on your album feel like ballads, and your performance is typically more indie rock or metal, no?

BB: Some of the songs are really old songs... kicking around for 15 years, and others were written this

year. I probably have 50 ripped legal pad papers of different lists of songs and somehow, I just landed on this batch. When I play live there is a tendency for this rock side to come out – and I’ll climb things! I love that aspect of the show, being as raucous as possible, climbing into the audience and laying down on the floor, or doing weird experimental stuff with my voice. But I think the true artist that I am, when I think back over the experiences that I’ve had, is that solo acoustic guy with no amplification in a cafe in Brooklyn, or a small venue somewhere – I think that’s the closest to who I really am and I wanted to tap into that.

M: When you were done with the album did you think- oh this was exactly what I wanted?

BB: You know, through podcasting I learned about creating and sharing content, [with] the idea being, “Let’s make it, learn from it and keep working.” A lot of people said, “Why even make an album? Just make a song.” But I felt like I needed to have a foundation. I deleted most of my old music off of Spotify... to establish a new foothold with the [listener]. Heaven-forbid, I’m unable to make music for some reason... and if someone stumbles upon my stuff, they’ll say, “Okay, I think I know where this guy was coming from.” It represents me. Then in May, right as I was finishing the record, my computer crashed and I ended up losing it temporarily. Luckily, I was able to recover most of it, but there was one song that I thought came out really good called “Lonely1,” which was completely lost. I was devastated... and my roommate, Randy Robbins, an incredible songwriter said, I think you can do that song even better, and I did. I’m really proud of the perseverance there... I was prepared to enter into a deep depression as a result of losing the record. I have really worked hard since the pandemic [at trying] to improve my mental health. And I think that if it was 2019 or early 2020, before I really started taking some steps, I probably would have had a complete meltdown or at least just given up on the project.

M: You took the setback as an opportunity. I wrote down a lyric from this song actually: “I’m an axe so complex.” Is that right?

BB: The lyric is “I’m an X”. A lot of people probably think that it’s an “ex” partner. But it’s the letter X and it has a couple of meanings. One is “I’m an X factor”, I guess. But really it comes down to how **I see myself as somebody who has always been gender-neutral**. I don’t identify as non-binary or anything, and I don’t advertise this, this is probably the first moment that I’ve ever stated this to a person in the public sphere. **But I’m an X and I always have been**. That’s why it hurts when people make fun of me for wearing pink overalls. I take it so deeply personally when people attack other people’s views. I don’t experience life through the eyes of a male. Now, I know that I am privileged to be a white male, don’t get me wrong, I totally see that... But the lyric is sort of a hint to people of where I stand in the world, **I don’t really see myself locked into any gender**. And I think that’s where our society is heading — toward gender fluidity and changing norms. One of the things I don’t like about bands anymore is moving heavy equipment. I’m pretty strong and I don’t love lugging stuff and some people make fun of me for that, [because the thought is], “You’re the guy, you should lift something up.”

M: It’s unfortunate that people make assumptions and create behavioral expectations of you, others, us... based on how we look and on the norms that are being upheld. We all have identities that we’re managing, that we might share or we might not. Thank you for talking about the complexity of identity, and for recognizing the privilege and safety that can come with presenting as male and white. Before we end, I wanted to ask one last thing about a specific song. I loved the lyric “Tell me your fire sign” because I’m a Leo, but I couldn’t figure out how to say the song title. Is it “Toucanet”?

BB: Yes! Like a little toucan, the bird. I wrote that song earlier this year when my partner was in Brazil. She goes pretty regularly but this time the trip kept getting extended, and then she got dengue fever, and it was just kind of a weird time. I wrote that song in one take. I bought a keyboard, set it up, and that song came out. I was like, "What? Wow, that's new." I'm not a pianist at all, but that song was pure soul and a pure expression of a February night... with lyrics like "When did my sky turn gray?"

Want to experience this indie record and learn more about Bill? Stream his music on Spotify or Bandcamp, visit bartholomewtown.com (and watch his podcast), follow him on Instagram at [@billbartholomew](https://www.instagram.com/billbartholomew) for 2023 tour dates, and keep a lookout for him on WPRO and Rhode Island PBS.